

Chapter 2

The Battle of Abu Ageila, 1956

Defending this position [Abu Ageila] proved a major success in the operations of 1956; indeed, it was a source of great pride for the Egyptian forces who fought in the Sinai.

—Lieutenant General Salah al-Din al-Hadidi¹

The positions of Um Katef [Umm Qatef] and Um Shihan [Umm Shihan]—or, as the Egyptians call them, the defended localities of Abu Ageila—are the only sectors where, so far, the Egyptians fought extremely well and our [Israeli] forces extremely poorly.

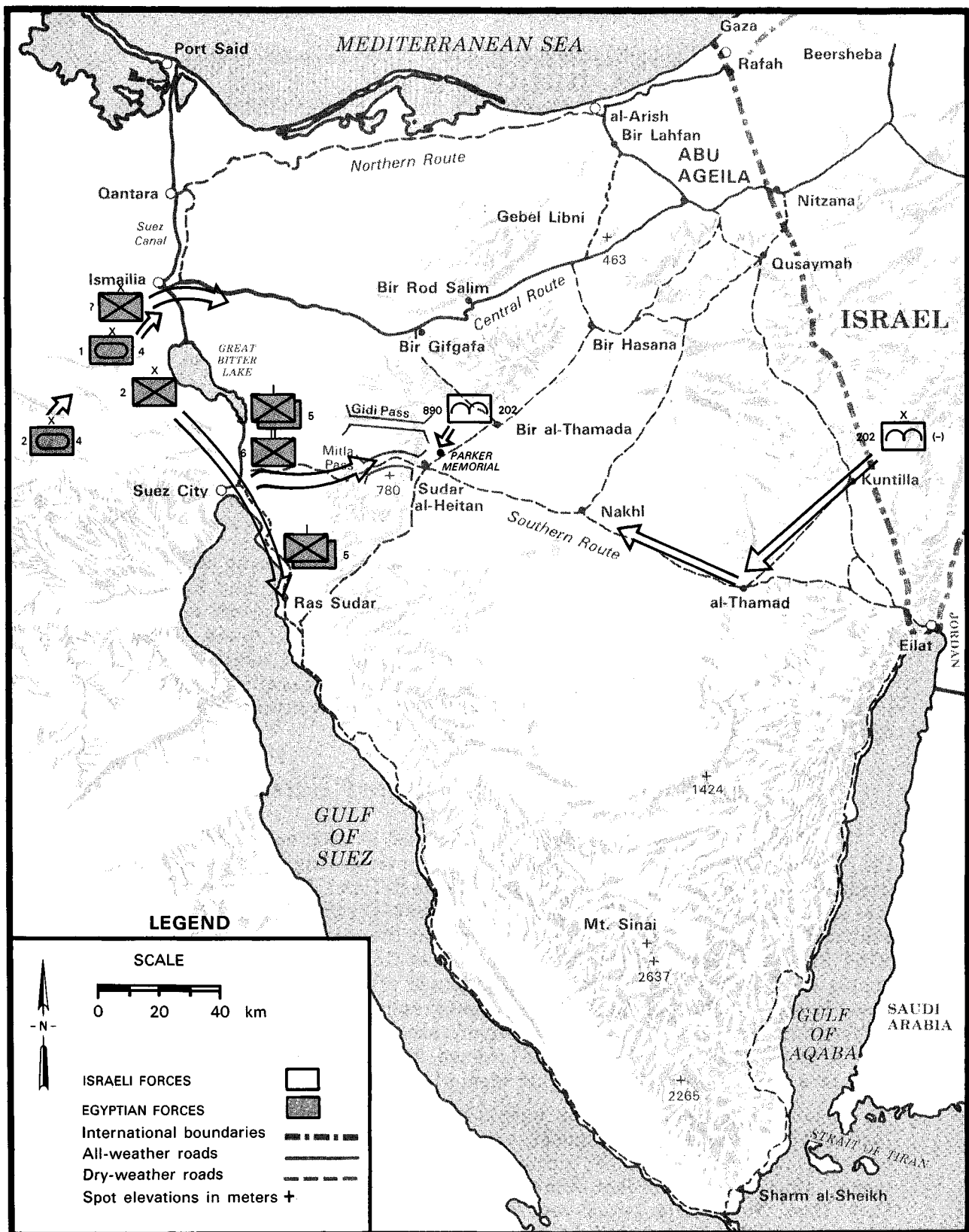
—Moshe Dayan²

Britain and France kept their part of the Sèvres Agreement and helped the Israelis defeat the Egyptian Army in the Sinai. London and Paris presented their ultimatum to the Egyptian and Israeli governments and then followed up on their threats with the actual bombing of Egyptian airfields, although the bombardment took place thirteen hours behind schedule. During this tense period of fifty hours, Dayan faced two major operational problems: to protect the isolated paratroopers at Mitla and to overcome the stalwart resistance of the Egyptian defenders at Abu Ageila.

The Mitla Operation: An Isolated Elite Force

Israel opened the land campaign as scheduled at 1659 on 29 October with the drop of the 890th Battalion of the 202d Paratroop Brigade, a force of 395 paratroopers commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Raful Eitan (later chief of the General Staff in the 1982 war in Lebanon). Originally, the Israelis had wanted the paratroopers to take up positions at the western entrance into the Mitla Pass, some thirty kilometers from the Suez Canal, but air reconnaissance photos on the 28th had revealed the presence of tents and vehicles in the area. Israeli intelligence believed the photographs depicted a military camp rather than a construction site, and Dayan, accepting this erroneous interpretation, altered his plan slightly and ordered Eitan to land east of the Mitla Pass at a place known as the Parker Memorial (see map 6).

Although the 890th Battalion missed its target and landed five kilometers east of the desired site, Eitan quickly organized his force and moved westward, reaching his objective by 1930. He then had his men dig in to await reinforcements, since Dayan's orders expressly forbade him to attempt to enter the Mitla Pass. Meanwhile, Israeli and French aircraft dropped Eitan vital arms and supplies that included eight jeeps, four 105-mm recoilless antitank guns,



Map 6. Opening moves by Israel and Egypt, 29–30 October



Mid-East Wars: The Israeli Commando's

Paratroopers assembling at the Parker Memorial

and two 120-mm mortars. The air transports completed their mission on the 30th, several hours after midnight.

Concurrent with the airborne operation, the remainder of the 202d Paratroop Brigade crossed the border at Kuntilla reinforced by additional combat and support units, among them a company of AMX-13 tanks. Lieutenant Colonel Ariel Sharon, the commander of this column of approximately 3,000 men, took the Kuntilla—al-Thamad—Nakhl route to link up with Eitan's force. After several clashes with Egyptian units along the southern route and numerous delays resulting from vehicle breakdowns in the sand, Sharon finally arrived at his destination at 2230 on 30 October after having traveled 290 kilometers in approximately 30 hours. Then, like Eitan before him, Sharon received strict orders from Dayan not to mount an assault on the Egyptian positions in the Mitla Pass.³ This restriction prevented the paratroopers from occupying more defensible ground within the Mitla Pass, which they could have done easily on the night of 29–30 October—before the arrival of Egyptian troops. Dayan, however, only wanted to provide a pretext for France and Britain to launch a joint military invasion of the Suez Canal.

The Egyptians reacted quickly to these two opening moves. During the early evening hours of the 29th, word reached Cairo of the Mitla landing and the Kuntilla crossing. Both operations caught the Egyptians completely by surprise: not only had the Egyptian leadership braced itself for a possible invasion in the Nile Delta, but the presence of an Israeli force in the middle of the Sinai made little military sense to the Egyptian senior command. While the Egyptians understood the strategic importance of the southern half of the Sinai with regard to Sharm al-Sheikh and the oil fields at Ras Sudar, posi-



Courtesy of Infantry and Brig. Gen. S. L. A. Marshall

Israeli paratroopers organizing their position at Mitla Pass

tioning Israeli forces at the Mitla Pass would not sever the important land route along the western shore of the peninsula that ran south from Suez City to both locations.

Muhammad Haykal, a close friend of Nasser throughout the period, described the bewilderment and confusion that prevailed among Egypt's political and military leadership that first evening. Nasser's first words to Haykal on the phone were allegedly: "The Israelis are in the Sinai and they seem to be fighting the sands, because they are occupying one empty position after another. . . . We can't make out what's happening." On arriving at general headquarters after his phone conversation with Nasser, Haykal found several theories circulating to explain the Israeli military action. Some officers suggested an Israeli feint intended to draw attention to Egypt while Israel invaded Jordan; others speculated a major Israeli operation would follow in the northern Sinai while Egyptian forces moved to deal with the diversionary actions in the south.⁴

Despite the confusion regarding the Israelis' intent, Nasser reached an important decision on how to deal with the Israeli forces at Mitla and along the southern route. The commander of the Eastern Military District had already ordered the 2d Infantry Brigade, stationed at Fayid on the west bank, to dispatch its 6th Infantry Battalion, plus two infantry companies from the 5th Infantry Battalion to blocking positions at the eastern entrance to the Mitla Pass. In addition, two other companies from the 5th set out for Ras Sudar to protect the oil wells there. The force sent to Mitla, although harassed by the Israeli Air Force, managed to reach its destination by late morning of the 30th and took shelter in the caves on the hillsides of the defile.

After listening to various viewpoints expressed at general headquarters (GHQ), Nasser decided to move the 1st and 2d Armored Brigades from the 4th Armored Division (still in formation) to a staging area between Bir Gifgafa

and Bir Rod Salim on the central route. From here, the two Egyptian armor brigades, comprising 200 T-34 tanks and SU-100 antitank self-propelled guns, could move south and southeast to meet Eitan's force at Mitla and Sharon's column moving toward Nakhl. Or they could head east to reinforce the northern Sinai should an Israeli main effort develop there. To support the two armored brigades, GHQ dispatched an infantry brigade to Bir Rod Salim. The Egyptians also shifted other military units around in case the Israeli moves were the beginning of a major invasion (see map 6).⁵

In transporting their tank force to the Sinai, the Egyptians faced a number of problems. In 1956, only one bridge—a combined railway and auto trestle at Firdan near Ismailia—spanned the Suez Canal. Moreover, one of the 4th Division's two tank brigades was near Cairo guarding an avenue of approach to the capital from Alexandria, and the brigade had to use rail cars to reach its crossing point at Firdan. The other tank brigade, which was located close to the canal, began moving across the Suez waterway shortly after midnight on the 30th. The dispersal of armor over a wide area meant the Egyptian Army also needed the night of 30–31 October to get the entire tank division safely across the canal and assemble it in its staging area for a possible counterthrust against the Israelis.⁶

During this 24-hour period, the Egyptian high command expected to discern Israel's true intentions and take more appropriate measures. Nonetheless, Egyptian commanders had made some sound decisions: an infantry force

Israeli paratroops checking equipment on the first morning at Mitla Pass

Israel Defense Army 1948–1958



would meet the Israelis' closest intrusion to the canal, and the armor reserve would cautiously deploy to meet any major Israeli offensive elsewhere in the Sinai. However, the Egyptians' delay meant that Britain and France would be able to give their ultimatum before the Egyptian armor reserves challenged the paratroopers at Mitla and other Israeli forces in the Sinai.

The Capture of Qusaymah, 30 October

In the Abu Ageila sector, Operation Kadesh called for the Israeli 4th Infantry Brigade to leave its staging area near the Egyptian border on the evening of 29 October and take Qusaymah by the morning of the 30th. After accomplishing this mission, part of the 4th Brigade was to stand ready to clear the Qusaymah Track for an assault on Umm Qatef from the south. The 4th Brigade would perform this mission in conjunction with the 10th Brigade, which would attack from the east.⁷ According to this plan, the 7th Armored Brigade could enter the war no earlier than 31 October, its mission depending on events on the battlefield.

As it turned out, however, Brigadier General Assaf Simhoni, the Israeli commander on the Sinai front, disobeyed Dayan's orders and committed his tank brigade prematurely out of concern that he might prove unable to seize Qusaymah on schedule. Colonel Joseph Harpaz, the commander of the 4th Brigade, experienced some initial delay and confusion in organizing his force

Israeli tanks on the move



Israel Defense Army 1948—1958

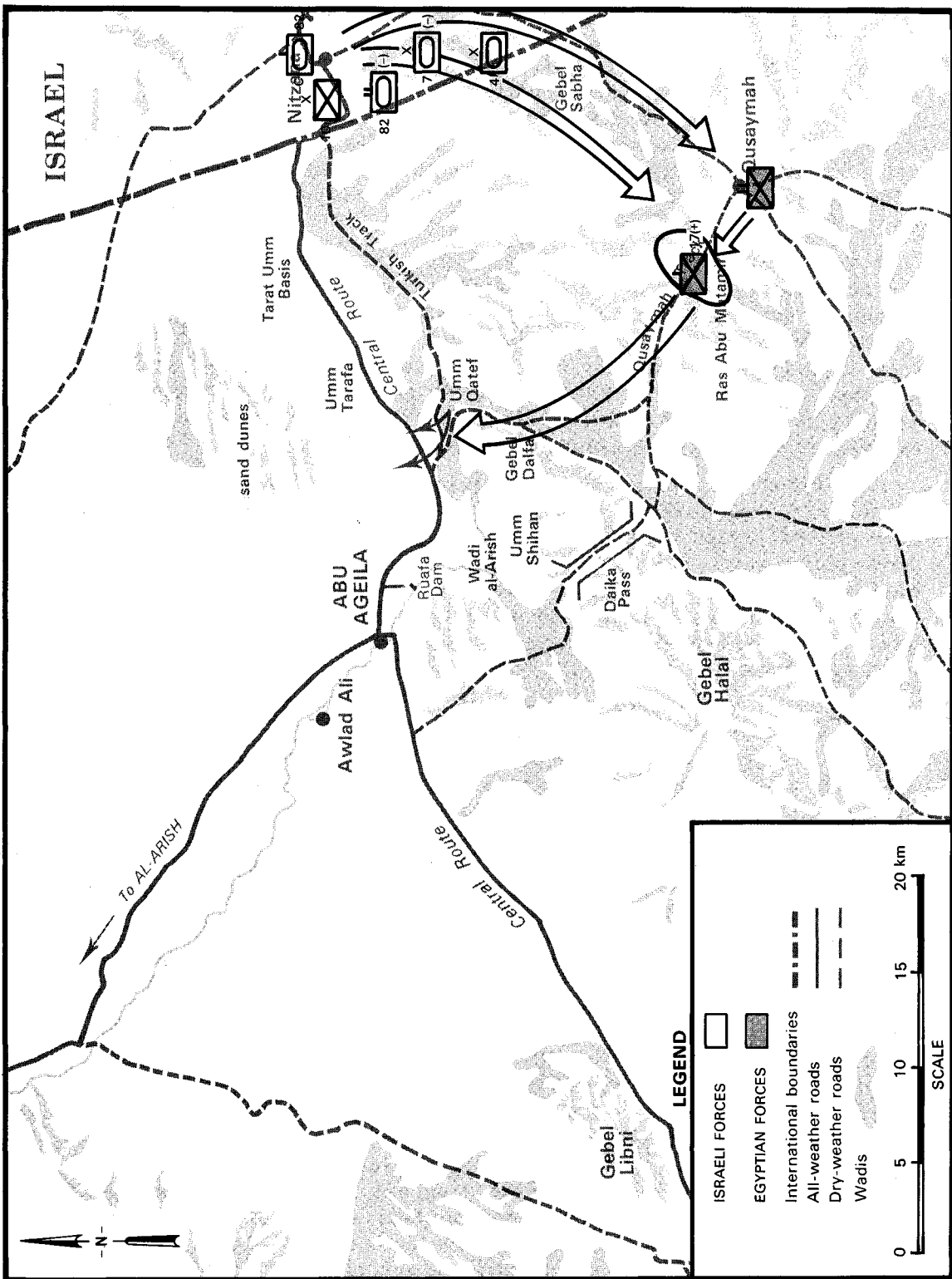
of reservists in its designated area at Nitzana in Israel, some eighteen kilometers from Qusaymah. Consequently, GHQ delayed the operation for several hours, but Harpaz' problems did not end there. Transportation difficulties also forced him to depart for Qusaymah with only one-third of the brigade's allotted ammunition supply. He had, after all, been given only forty-eight hours, instead of the normal seventy-two hours, to mobilize his brigade. Once en route, the brigade, moving on foot south of the road connecting Qusaymah with the Israeli area of Nitzana, encountered sand obstacles that slowed down its progress. This was why Simhoni, who feared that the 4th Brigade might fail to adhere to its timetable, ordered the 7th Armored Brigade into action against Dayan's specific orders.⁸

After receiving his new instructions from Simhoni, Colonel Uri Ben-Ari, the commanding officer of the 7th Armored Brigade, divided his force for the assault on Qusaymah. He ordered the 82d Armored Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Avraham Adan, along a dirt track north of the Qusaymah-Nitzana road. This battalion had only two of its three tank companies (C Company had been attached to the 10th Infantry Brigade). Ben-Ari then took the remainder of the brigade with him along the Nitzana-Qusaymah road in order to arrive at Qusaymah as rapidly as possible (see map 7).⁹

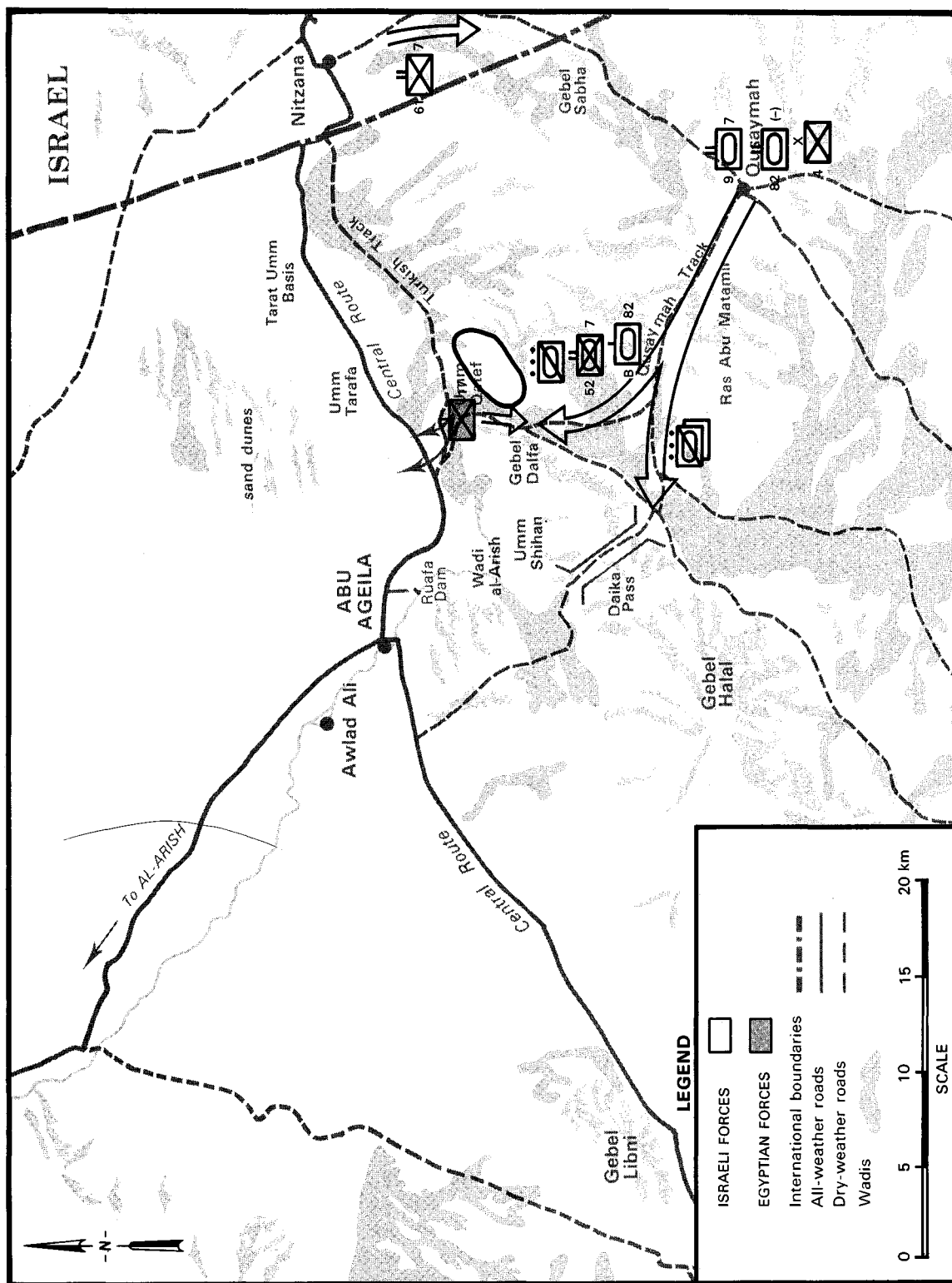
The Israeli 4th Brigade was already engaged in battle with the Egyptian defenders at Qusaymah when advance elements of Ben-Ari's 7th Armored Brigade arrived. Israeli tank fire quickly convinced the Egyptians of their desperate plight, and at around 0700—0730, the Egyptian National Guard battalion hastily retreated toward Umm Qatef, with elements of the 17th Infantry Battalion withdrawing from their position at Ras Abu Matamir without a fight.¹⁰ The local Egyptian commanders had thus followed orders that required them to withdraw in the face of a far superior force.

The Israeli commanders at Qusaymah, encouraged by their initial success, decided to continue to press the Egyptians. Ben-Ari sent his reconnaissance company of three platoons in two directions—toward the Daika Pass and Umm Qatef. He also ordered the 52d Mechanized Infantry Battalion from the 7th Brigade, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Uri Rom, to move within three kilometers of Umm Qatef and await further orders. To strengthen this mechanized force, Ben-Ari ordered Adan to give Rom a tank company (B Company) from the 82d Armored Battalion.¹¹ This decision reduced Adan's battalion to one tank company and a company of mechanized infantry (see map 8).

When elements of the 52d Mechanized Infantry Battalion appeared south of Umm Qatef at around 1230, Boulos, the Egyptian commander of the 6th Infantry Brigade at Abu Ageila, was already engrossed in preparing to meet the Israelis. His engineering detachment blew up positions on Qusaymah Track in an attempt to stop the Israeli advance. Rom, the Israeli battalion commander, decided to press ahead and probe the Egyptian position. His force steered around small crevices and managed to approach within 600 meters of the main perimeter of Abu Ageila. In the meantime, Boulos reorganized his defenses, strengthened by the arrival of the National Guard battalion from Qusaymah and the reinforced infantry company from the Ras Abu Matamir Pass. Once the Israelis circumvented the obstacles and threatened to break into the underbelly of the main defensive perimeter of Abu Ageila, Boulos decided to launch a counterattack with one company from the 17th Battalion



Map 7. The Israeli capture of Qusaymah



supported by artillery (see map 8). Unfortunately for the Egyptians, Boulos suffered either a wound or a heart attack at around 1300 as he prepared his force for a hand-to-hand engagement. He was evacuated to al-Arish and eventually to a hospital in Cairo.¹²

This aggressive initial Egyptian response brought success despite the loss of the brigade commander. After accurate fire destroyed two to four Israeli Sherman tanks and a number of armored vehicles, the Israeli brigade commander, Ben-Ari, who arrived on the scene during the heat of the battle, ordered his force to withdraw to positions several kilometers away. Dayan described the engagement thus:

The [Israeli] attack met with strong resistance and accurate anti-tank fire from well entrenched "Archers" . . . the brigade commander [Ben-Ari] reached the spot, and it was his judgement that the battalion team had no chance of capturing the Egyptian position on its own. The battalion accordingly retired and the brigade commander started assembling additional forces for the attack.¹³

But Israeli tanks would not have a second chance to assault Abu Ageila from the south.

Moshe Dayan, quite surprised by the unexpected turn of events with the 38th *Ugdah* at Qusaymah, decided to confront his senior tactical commanders in the field. He met with Simhoni, Wallach, and Ben-Ari near Qusaymah around noontime on the 30th. There, Dayan expressed his anger at the premature commitment of Israeli armor against his explicit orders, later writing in his diary: "Yesterday I had stiff contretemps with the GOC Southern Command who, contrary to GHQ orders, sent 7th Armored Brigade into action before their appointed time."¹⁴

Simhoni, the front commander, was concerned about the fate of the paratroopers at Mitla and understood the importance of Qusaymah for opening a second route to the isolated force. However, he was unaware of Israel's secret agreement with the British and the French that had placed restrictions on the tempo of the campaign. So Simhoni accused Dayan of ruining the Israeli Army with his timid plan.¹⁵ Simhoni's views and decision of that day underscored the dilemma facing the Israeli Army in Operation Kadesh. Its senior commanders had been taught to exercise initiative and press the enemy, yet they began the war without any clear notion of the political forces restraining bold military actions. Simhoni took the natural course of action expected of an Israeli commander: he followed the spirit, rather than the letter, of his orders.

Dayan understood this dilemma and therefore avoided punishing Simhoni. During this first phase of operations in the Qusaymah area, Israeli commanders had clearly shown aggressiveness and flexibility in command, and Dayan admired his subordinates in this regard, even though their actions threatened to commit Israel prematurely to a major campaign in the Sinai: "I could not avoid a sympathetic feeling over the hastening of the [7th] Brigade into combat even before they were required. Better to be engaged in restraining the noble stallion than in prodding the reluctant mule!"¹⁶

This famous statement giving primacy to the principle of initiative would remain one of the main legacies of Dayan's tenure as chief of the General Staff (1953–58) and to this day constitutes a key element in the Israeli military ethos that charges Israeli officers to view plans as merely a basis for

change. In this regard, the battle of Abu Ageila holds an honored place in modern Israeli military history: it constituted the first major application of this Israeli principle in a post-1948 war where the initiative was demonstrated contrary to specific orders.

In response to the train of events at Qusaymah and Umm Qatef, Dayan decided not to inform Ben-Gurion of the major changes in Operation Kadesh, his excuse being that the venerable leader lay in bed with influenza.¹⁷ Yet Israel was slowly becoming enmeshed in a major campaign without the clear commitment of French and British military forces—something Ben-Gurion dearly wanted to avoid as evident from the secret talks at Sèvres. The joint ultimatum promised by London and Paris would arrive in Cairo at 1800 on 30 October—hours after the conclusion of the Qusaymah meeting.

Before leaving the 38th *Ugdah*, Dayan issued new orders that demonstrated his continuing anxiety for the fate of the 890th Paratroop Battalion at Mitla. The Israeli Air Force was to continue to concentrate its sorties against any movements in the direction of Mitla. Moreover, Dayan ordered Harpaz to move his entire 4th Brigade toward Nakhl in support of Sharon, while he directed Ben-Ari's 7th Armored Brigade to bypass Umm Qatef and head in two directions—toward Gebel Libni on the central route and Bir al-Hasana on the way to Mitla. At Bir al-Hasana, Israeli tanks would be in a position to protect Sharon's flank and come to the aid of Eitan if necessary.¹⁸ With these new directives, Wallach found himself without the use of the 7th Armored Brigade for the assault on Abu Ageila.

But Dayan could have taken another course of action. He could have left the entire 7th Armored Brigade on the Qusaymah Track to mount a coordinated attack with the reinforced 10th Infantry Brigade for the morning of the 31st. Instead, only one tank company—C Company attached to the 10th Brigade—remained to assault the entire position of Abu Ageila. Eventually, GHQ would have to release two tank companies from its strategic reserve to beef up the armor for the assault on Umm Qatef.

A Turning Point in the Battle for Abu Ageila

In the early afternoon of the 30th, an important event occurred that proved a turning point in the Israeli attempt to take Abu Ageila. Elements of the Israeli 7th Armored Brigade's reconnaissance company discovered that the Daika Pass was unguarded: the Egyptians had blown up a bridge just before the entrance and then had withdrawn deep into the defile. On learning this, one Israeli reconnaissance platoon occupied overwatching positions, while a second platoon moved into the defile. By 1615, the second platoon reached the northern tip of the Daika Pass, within view of Ruafa Dam some ten kilometers to the northeast. There, the platoon commander observed Egyptian trucks rushing supplies into the main defensive perimeter.¹⁹

The discovery of an open route through Daika Pass presented the Israelis with a golden opportunity for dislodging the Egyptian defenders at Abu Ageila with an attack from the west. The earlier Israeli probe along Qusaymah Track had confronted formidable Egyptian defenses. Ben-Ari now hoped that Egyptian positions at Ruafa Dam would not be as unyielding. On receiving word sometime in the late afternoon of developments at the Daika Pass, Ben-Ari

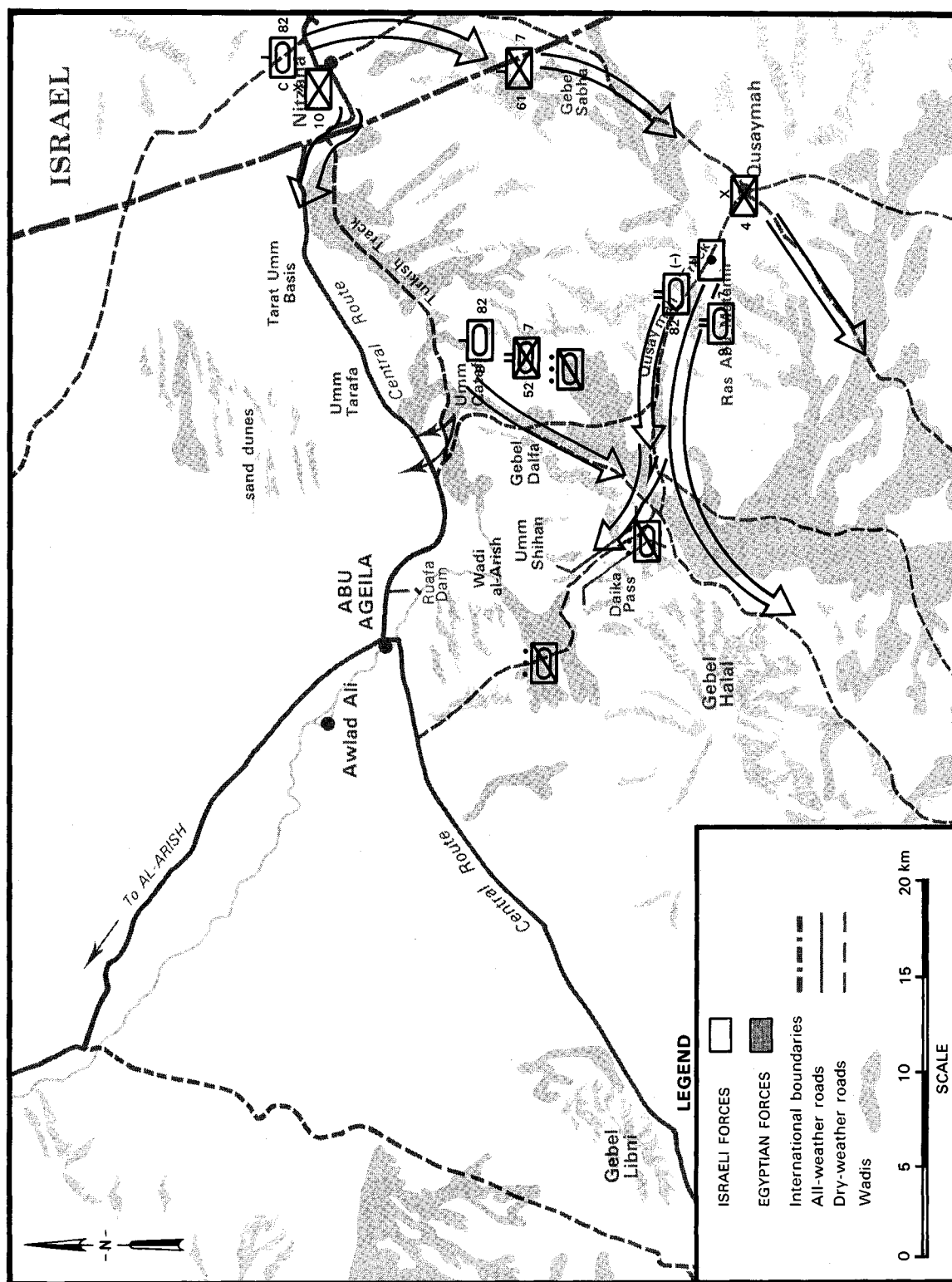
sought to exploit this fortunate turn of events and gained Wallach's support for the venture.²⁰

Ben-Ari redeployed the 7th Brigade for this new mission. A reconnaissance platoon and the 9th Armored Battalion, composed of AMX-13 tanks, headed for Bir al-Hasana, while the 61st Motorized Battalion took up positions south of Umm Qatef. To move through the Daika Pass, Ben-Ari decided to employ the 82d Armored Battalion, the 52d Mechanized Battalion, and the 7th Brigade's mortar and artillery battalions.²¹ At this juncture, only the A Company of Sherman tanks actually belonged to Adan's 82d Battalion. The 10th Brigade had gained C Company at the outset of the campaign; B Company had been attached to the 52d Mechanized Battalion at Qusaymah for the probe of Egyptian defenses along that track. Ben-Ari planned to return B Company to Adan once the tanks passed through the Daika Pass (see map 9).

To augment Ben-Ari's force, Wallach, the *ugdah* commander, decided at 1900 to return Adan's C Company of tanks that had been attached to the 10th Brigade (see map 9). With this decision, Adan could look forward to having his entire battalion back. After the war, however, Dayan criticized Wallach for taking this step because it left the 10th Infantry Brigade without any armor support for its scheduled assault on Umm Qatef. Wallach defended his action as appropriate given the developing tactical situation in the rear of Umm Qatef and the imperative need to exploit this excellent opportunity with all available assets.²² No doubt Wallach was also concerned that the 7th Armored Brigade would be in the rear of Abu Ageila without its 9th Armored Battalion—which was en route to Bir al-Hasana—while the Egyptian 4th Armored Division was preparing for a counterattack in the vicinity of Bir Rod Salim.

With this reconfiguration of forces and the assignment of new missions, Wallach was left with the 10th Infantry Brigade to attack Umm Qatef and three battalions—one each of armor, mechanized infantry, and mortars—from the 7th Armored Brigade for taking Abu Ageila and Ruafa Dam. Although Israeli initiative, courage, and offensive spirit were leading to the encirclement of the main defensive perimeter of Abu Ageila, Wallach had lost the element of surprise and much of his initial advantage in men and materiel. In a way, however, he was lucky, for the discovery of the unguarded pass resulted in a major part of the 7th Armored Brigade remaining for the attack on Abu Ageila instead of heading toward central Sinai as ordered by Dayan at Qusaymah. The task now became one of taking full advantage of those forces.

By evening, word reached Dayan of the new situation at Daika Pass. Dayan soon approved Wallach's plan to exploit the pass with elements from the 7th Brigade and issued new directives for the next day. Ben-Ari, in addition to taking Bir al-Hasana as planned, would now also seize the Ruafa Dam and then help assault Umm Qatef. The 10th Brigade, already committed by Simhoni, was to capture Tarat Umm Basis that evening and prepare to take Umm Qatef the next morning (31 October) in coordination with Ben-Ari's attack from the west. The 77th *Ugdah*, to the north, would attack Rafah on the evening of 31 October—1 November and then proceed to al-Arish. The 9th Infantry Brigade, scheduled to take Sharm al-Sheikh, was not to embark on the coastal road until the establishment of air supremacy (see map 5).²³



At this point in the campaign—that is, twenty-four hours after the para-troop operation—Israeli forces were becoming dangerously spread out in central and southern Sinai. Moreover, they were maneuvering without seizing important terrain or destroying enemy forces. This same dynamic would continue for the next twenty-four hours, but by then, Dayan desperately wanted to seize Umm Qatef.

Egyptian Reactions to Events at Abu Ageila

The Egyptians adjusted rather well to the developments at Qusaymah, Umm Qatef, and the Daika Pass. To alleviate the loss of Boulos, Qadi—the commander of the 3d Infantry Division—ordered Colonel Sa'ad Mutawalli, the commander of the Egyptian 4th Infantry Brigade (which constituted the main part of the division's reserve), to assume command of the defenses at Abu Ageila. Mutawalli reached his new assignment as commander of the 6th Infantry Brigade by 1700 on 30 October.²⁴ His role in commanding the 6th Brigade at Abu Ageila would prove critical to the Egyptians in their tenacious defense during the next thirty-six hours.

By early evening of 30 October, the Egyptians were becoming acutely aware that a major Israeli force might be surrounding Abu Ageila. By 1700, the Israeli 10th Infantry Brigade had crossed the frontier on the 30th and seized the observation posts before Tarat Umm Basis. By 1900, the Israelis captured Tarat Umm Basis, some nine kilometers east of Umm Qatef.²⁵ At this juncture, both Qadi and Mutawalli had riveted their attentions on an Israeli force moving through the Daika Pass, which threatened to cut off Abu Ageila from Ismailia and al-Arish.

Based on reports received throughout the day of the 30th, Qadi realized the seriousness of the threat to his 6th Brigade and dispatched an infantry battalion—augmented by a field artillery battery and four self-propelled Archers—from al-Arish to Abu Ageila. These units, which arrived in the Abu Ageila area sometime after midnight on the 31st, provided Mutawalli with additional combat power and reduced the Israelis' force ratio advantage before the most intense fighting for Abu Ageila took place.²⁶ The Egyptian relief column, under Mutawalli's direction, would obstruct the Israelis in their attempts to break into the rear of Abu Ageila and repel the Israeli attacks of 31 October—1 November.

The First Engagements in the Egyptian Rear

Ben-Ari selected Lieutenant Colonel Avraham Adan's 82d Armored Battalion to take the crossroads at Abu Ageila. At the time of this decision, Adan, who awaited further orders at Qusaymah, was positioned to reach the Daika Pass more quickly than the 52d Mechanized Battalion, which had just fought south of Umm Qatef. Adan's unit was a tank battalion in name only. At Qusaymah, the 82d Battalion consisted of only one tank company of Shermans and a company of mechanized infantry. Adan hoped to have at least one of his two absent companies, if not both, back in time to assault Umm Qatef from the west the next morning (the 31st).

Ben-Ari's plan for the task force moving through Daika Pass under his command directed the brigade's battalion of artillery to provide fire support while Adan captured the Abu Ageila crossroads in the morning. Ben-Ari would then leap-frog past Adan with the 52d Mechanized Battalion and assault the defenses at Ruafa Dam. Then, in conjunction with the attack on Umm Qatef by the Israeli 10th Brigade from the east and the 61st Motorized Battalion from the south, Ben-Ari and Adan would together assault Umm Qatef with the 52d and 82d Battalions from the west (see map 10).²⁷

Getting through the narrow Daika Pass, however, presented Adan with some transportation problems. Although the brigade's reconnaissance platoon had negotiated the pass rather easily, the larger force of tanks and armored personnel carriers experienced unexpected difficulties. Nonetheless, at dawn on 31 October, Adan finally joined the reconnaissance platoon just south of the central route—tired but determined to press on toward his objective.

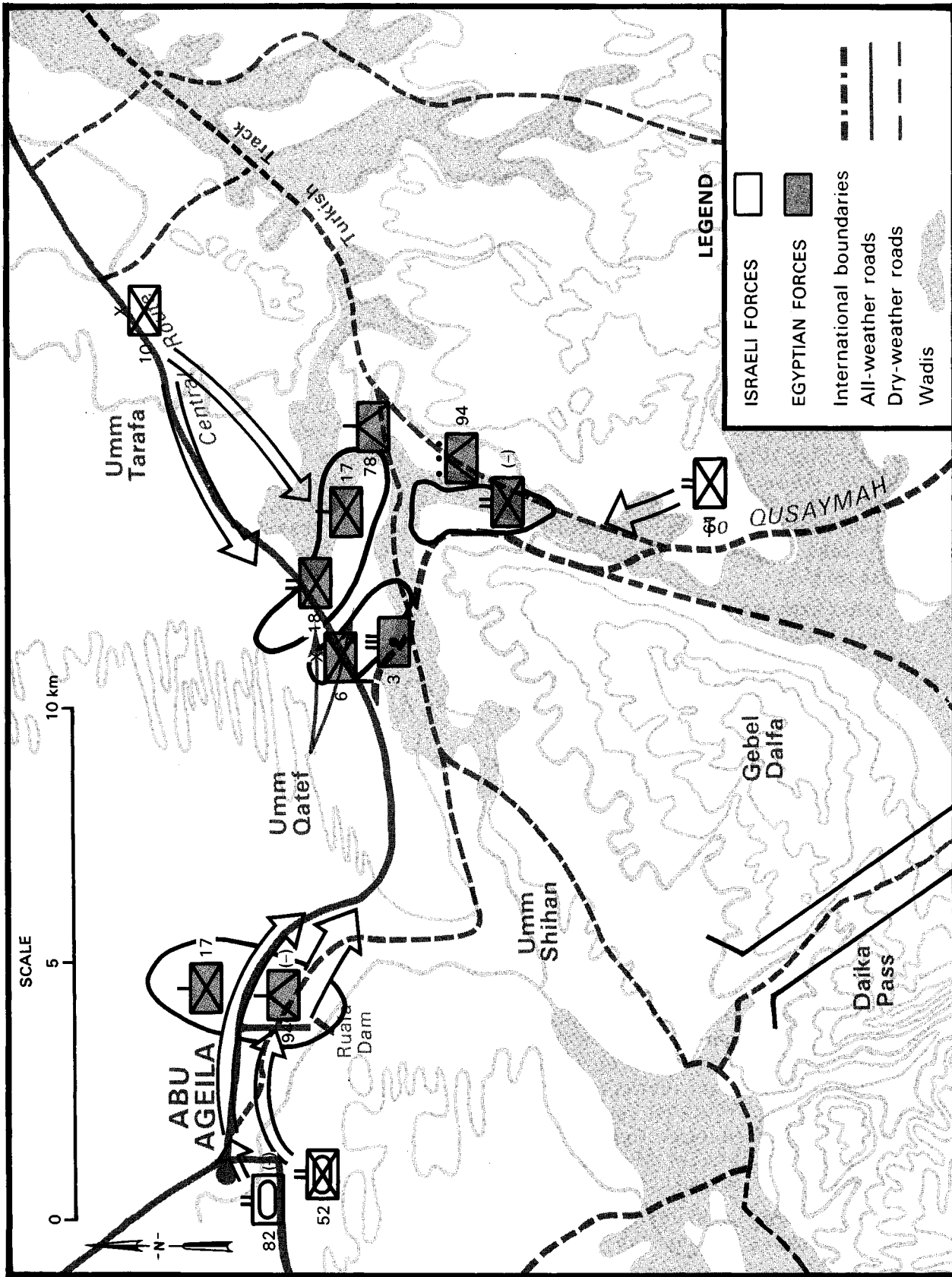
At this point in the campaign, problems in communications began to hamper command and control and impede coordination of the three forces surrounding Abu Ageila. Ben-Ari and Adan sometimes lost contact with Wallach, whose command post was located south of Tarat Umm Basis. To alleviate this problem during a critical phase of the operation, Wallach once resorted to sending his chief of staff to Adan to ensure the proper transmission of an order, for the SCR 608 and Mk 19 radios proved unreliable at long distances.²⁸

After arriving south of the central route, Adan quickly organized his forces for an assault on Abu Ageila, where the Egyptians had a small military camp with a few buildings containing caches of supplies. Adan had one company of fourteen Sherman tanks and another company of armored infantry on half-tracks. These would be useful, since taking Abu Ageila in the early morning required a dash across open country.

Unfortunately for the Israelis, the dazzling sun was in their face. Without hesitating, Adan's tanks charged the crossroads, firing on the move. Artillery fire from Egyptian positions at the Ruafa Dam, although inflicting some damage, proved unable to stop his advance. On reaching the crossroads, Adan defeated a small Egyptian force consisting of two dismounted platoons of infantry armed with bazookas. Between 0645–0700, the Israelis had seized the important crossroads of Abu Ageila and effectively cut off the Egyptian 6th Brigade from al-Arish. The Egyptians were surrounded.²⁹

Accounts differ as to what transpired next. Some sources, mainly Israeli, maintain that the Egyptian 12th Infantry Battalion (or part of it), sent on the 30th from al-Arish, had actually entered the main defensive perimeter to bolster defenses there and that on the 31st Qadi followed up with the dispatch of the 10th Infantry Battalion supported by a tank company of T-34s or Shermans. This relief column, however, suffered extensive damage from the Israeli Air Force while en route to Abu Ageila during the morning. Nevertheless, it still had some fighting power as it regrouped at the Awlad Ali area. Qadi then directed Mutawalli to attack from the dam with one force, while the 10th Battalion attacked Adan from the north.³⁰

Official Egyptian military sources offer another picture. According to them, Qadi had sent only the 12th Infantry Battalion from al-Arish. This force,

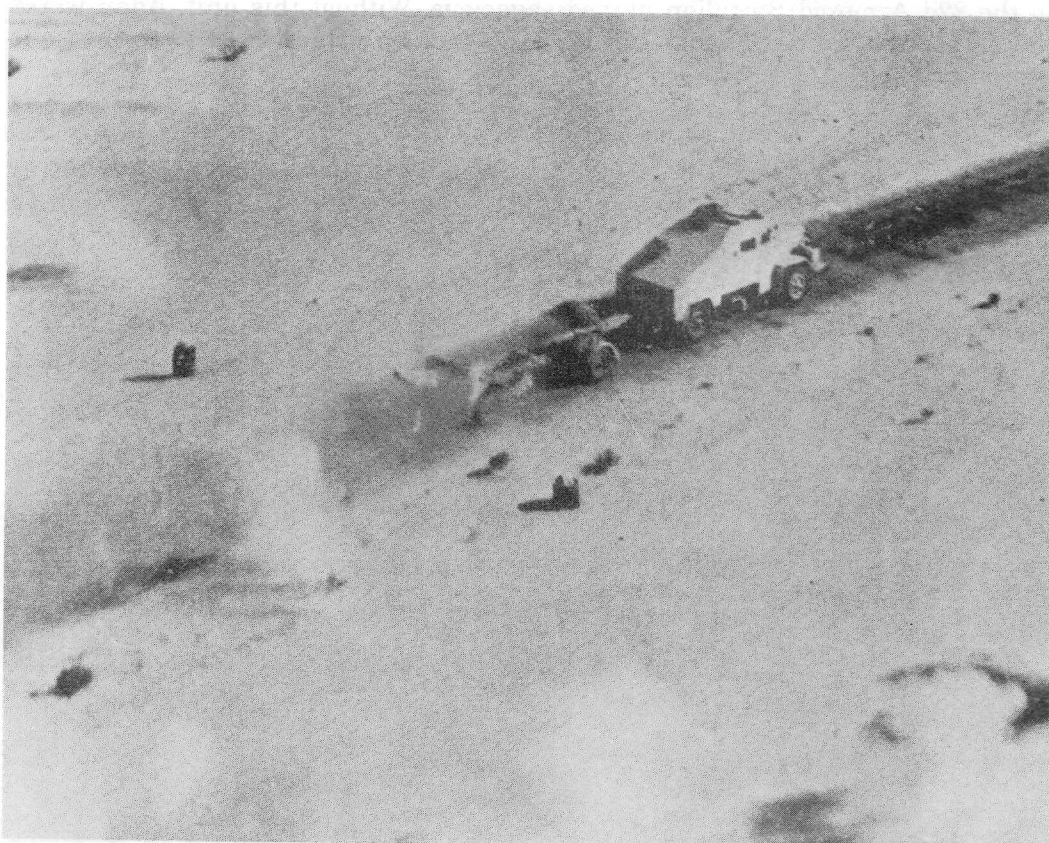


Map 10. Israeli plan of assault, 31 October



Courtesy of Major Thomas P. Odom

The central route, looking due east from the crossroads at Abu Ageila toward the Egyptian rear in the Ruafa Dam area



Israel Defense Army 1948—1958

Egyptian artillery column undergoing a strafing

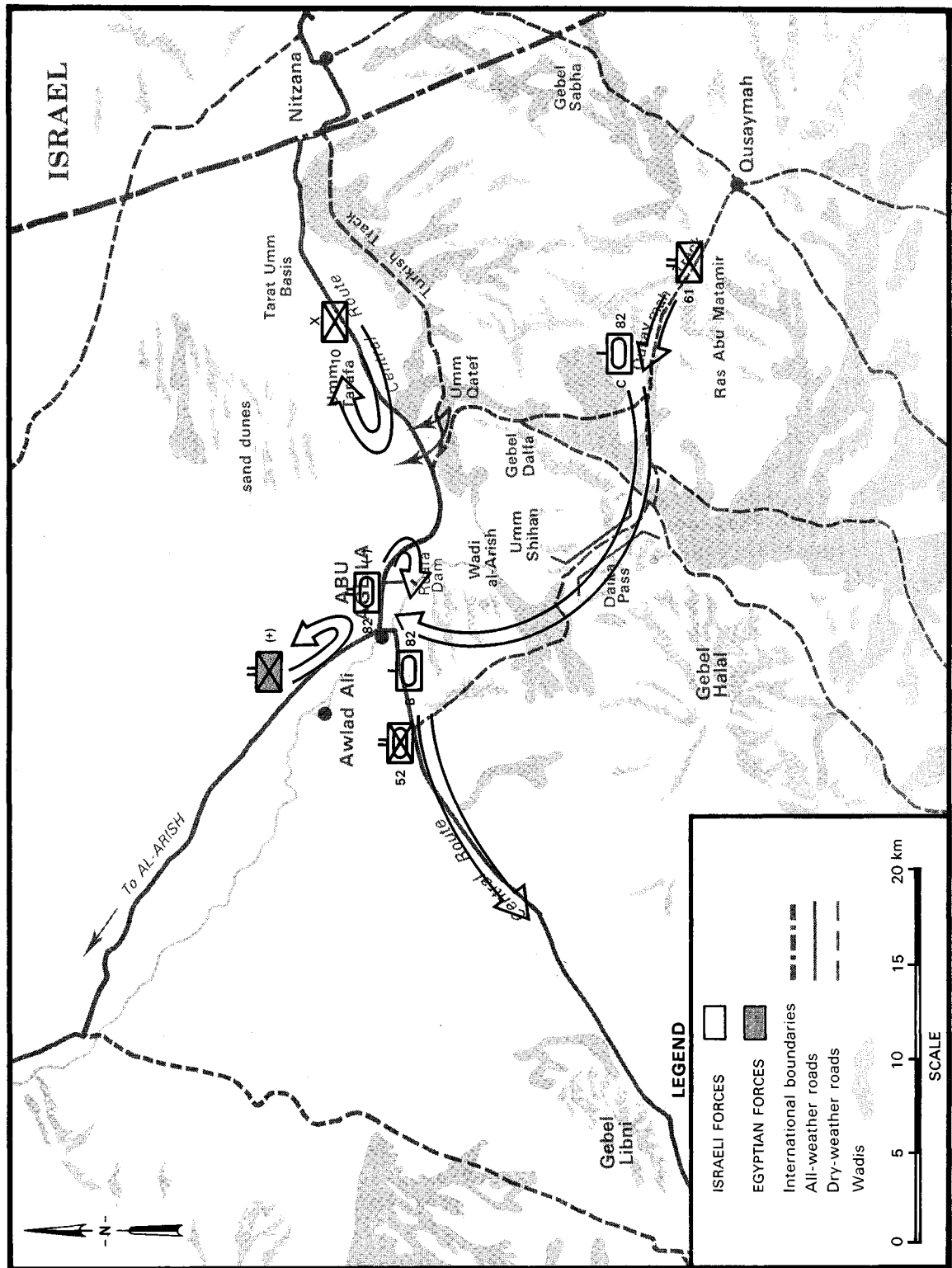
instead of moving into the main defensive perimeter, took up positions near Awlad Ali (at the main logistical center for the 6th Brigade). According to this account, the relief force had no tanks with which to attack Adan.³¹ Although resolution of these contradictory accounts remains impossible, Adan clearly faced a reinforced battalion from al-Arish, to the northwest of his position, on the morning of the 31st. This prevented Adan from concentrating his force for an attack to the east toward Ruafa Dam. Thus, the Egyptians had managed to send reinforcements of some sort to Abu Ageila that adversely affected the course of the battle for the Israelis.

Now, an unexpected development occurred that forced Ben-Ari to change his plans for taking Ruafa Dam and, in turn, put Adan in a precarious situation. On the morning of the 31st, the Israeli Air Force incorrectly reported the approach of an Egyptian armored force of T-34 tanks and SU-100 self-propelled guns in the vicinity of Gebel Libni, some forty kilometers west of Abu Ageila. Ben-Ari, who had now negotiated a passage through the Daika Pass, opted to move with his 52d Mechanized Battalion to meet the approaching Egyptian armor in a battle west of Abu Ageila. He also ordered the 9th Armored Battalion at Bir al-Hasana to turn north to attack the approaching Egyptian armor on its right flank. In order to defeat what he believed was a large armor force, Ben-Ari decided to keep Adan's B Company of Shermans that he had attached to the 52d Mechanized Infantry Battalion at Qusaymah.³² Now, Wallach's decision to have the 10th Brigade return Adan's C Company to the 82d Armored Battalion proved sagacious. Without this unit, Adan would have had approximately fourteen tanks to face an attack from two directions (see map 11).



Mid-East Wars: Israel's Armor in Action

Colonel Uri Ben-Ari, 7th Armored Brigade, controlling operations



Map 11. Developments on 31 October

Keeping Adan at the Abu Ageila crossroads, while a major risk, made tactical sense: The Egyptian defenders at Umm Qatef and Ruafa Dam were now completely surrounded. Years later, Adan described his important role in the battle for Abu Ageila this way: "... we were as a bone in the enemy's throat, disrupting its continuity between Nitzana and El Arish."³³

Concluding that he could not take the dam without more tanks, Adan decided to dig in and await the arrival of his second tank company. Dividing his meager force in two, he placed most of an infantry company and a platoon of tanks on dunes overlooking the al-Arish road to deal with the Egyptian force in his rear. Meanwhile, he assigned a rifle platoon and two tank platoons to face Ruafa Dam.³⁴

During the relative lull in fighting on the afternoon of the 31st, Mutawalli did not launch any major attacks against Adan's small force. Egyptian military sources later admit that this passivity on the Egyptians' part represented a serious tactical mistake.³⁵ Aggressive, synchronized attacks by Egyptian units from al-Arish and Ruafa Dam—in conjunction with the Egyptian Air Force—would have most likely destroyed the small Israeli force. At this point, Adan was extremely low on fuel and ammunition and would have found it extremely difficult to sustain a defense against a coordinated attack from two directions.³⁶

Adan took advantage of the calm to give his men a much needed respite. At approximately 1600, the second company of Shermans finally arrived from the 10th Brigade, raising the Israeli force to approximately 500 men and 30 tanks.³⁷ But much time had been wasted waiting for the tanks, and the Egyptians still stood fast. Nonetheless, now Adan could plan a serious assault on the Abu Ageila complex in conjunction with the two other Israeli forces moving from the south and east.

Initial Problems with the Israeli 10th Brigade

Adan's inability to mount an attack on the Ruafa Dam on the morning of the 31st was not too costly to the Israelis, because the Israeli 10th Infantry Brigade became immobilized by its own set of problems east of Umm Qatef. After seizing Tarat Umm Basis with relative ease by the early evening of the 30th, Goder's 10th Brigade became ineffectual. Goder failed to organize his force for a major assault against Umm Qatef early the next morning. After a probe with his reconnaissance force, he concluded that he needed the support of tanks to attack Umm Qatef in broad daylight across open terrain, and he appealed to his superiors for help. Simhoni passed on the request to GHQ. The Operations Branch in Tel Aviv, unable to locate Dayan, released part of its strategic reserve from the 37th Armored-Mechanized Brigade, and Goder settled down to await its arrival.³⁸

Dayan, although unaware of the above decision, learned of the 10th Brigade's inability to assault Umm Qatef in conjunction with Adan's attack in the rear. Dayan personally visited Goder at Umm Tarafa around noontime on the 31st, impressing on the commander the urgency of opening up the central route for the sake of the 7th Brigade and the paratroopers at Mitla. The 10th Brigade, much to his surprise and chagrin, showed little sign of being ready for this mission. Dayan found "the battalion commanders had

not [yet] made the necessary preparations for the attack on these two [Umm Qatef and Umm Shihan] localities.”³⁹

Angered by what he saw among his own troops, Dayan confronted the brigade and battalion commanders in a heated discussion:

The meeting with these officers was tough and not at all agreeable, and we all got angry. It was not only that I felt I was not getting through to them in my efforts to rouse them to action; it seemed clear that we were just not seeing things in the same light. Here I was urging the brigade command to get into combat, to advance and assault Um Katef, and they were just not prepared for it. They said they had been told by Southern Command that this assignment would be given to another unit. They had a thousand and one good and understandable reasons why they were unable that night to storm the Egyptian positions, with their minefields and well-laid defenses; but the fact is, in all its brutality, that the sole purpose in bringing them here was for them to capture these very positions, and it was vital for the campaign that this should be done as soon as possible.⁴⁰

In this exchange, Dayan learned of the commitment of a task force from the 37th Brigade into the battle for Abu Ageila.

Ignoring all arguments, Dayan assumed operational command and ordered the brigade to attack Umm Qatef with all haste. In the early afternoon and in broad daylight, Goder attacked with the brigade's reconnaissance unit and an infantry company in ten half-tracks and other assorted vehicles. The Egyptian defenders were ready and opened fire on this exposed force, scoring numerous hits using Archers from Umm Qatef and artillery from near Gebel Dalfa. The Israelis lost heart quickly and withdrew to the safety of Umm Tarafa. Afterwards, Dayan tersely described this effort as “the first lukewarm attempt [by the 10th Brigade].”⁴¹

South of Umm Qatef on Qusaymah Track, the 61st Motorized Battalion failed to attack on the morning of the 31st.⁴² Perhaps the infantry force, de-



Courtesy of Infantry and Brig. Gen. S. L. A. Marshall

The Israeli charge at Abu Ageila

prived of the luxury of half-tracks, had problems negotiating Qusaymah Track. The silence of published sources regarding the absence of an Israeli attack from the south for the next twenty-four hours remains a mystery (see map 11).

Israeli Command Problems

The emerging operational problems at Abu Ageila stemmed, in part, from Dayan's practice of command and control. Throughout the campaign, Dayan exhibited a penchant for being in the field with combat troops, returning to GHQ only in the evenings, when possible. In his memoirs, Dayan candidly admits to a problem here: "But of course my non-appearance [at the GHQ command post] during the day makes things difficult and upsets the ordered organization of the work."⁴³ In the case of the 10th Brigade, the Operations Branch of GHQ was left to make a decision without its chief of the General Staff, who later assumed operational command because he was unhappy with its actions.

Dayan's intervention at Abu Ageila caused a major dispute between him and the divisional task force commander. Wallach, commander of the 38th *Ugdah*, expressed serious reservations to Dayan concerning the latter's unrelenting determination to take Umm Qatef. Arguing that supplies could reach the 7th Armored Brigade by way of Qusaymah, Wallach saw no need to assault Abu Ageila: the defenders at Abu Ageila would eventually have to surrender since they were cut off from al-Arish. But according to Wallach, Dayan refused to listen to this argument and retained his fixation for conquering what amounted to "an imaginary road block." The events of 31 October—2 November resulted from what Wallach has since referred to as an "unnecessary, tragic misunderstanding" over the importance of Abu Ageila to the Sinai campaign.⁴⁴

Dayan, in his version of this controversial issue, views the significance of Abu Ageila to the Sinai campaign in a different light. According to him, the IDF desperately needed a favorable axis to support the 7th Armored Brigade and the 202d Paratroop Brigade at Mitla Pass because supply convoys were already experiencing bottlenecks on the alternate routes. The dirt track through Qusaymah was in such bad condition, especially after the clashes there with the Egyptian National Guard battalion, that only transports using four-wheel drives could negotiate this route. And of these, the army possessed a limited supply. Consequently, Dayan felt he had no choice but to seize Abu Ageila in order to control the central route, which could service forces moving toward the Suez Canal.⁴⁵

Dayan's position in this controversy contains much merit, especially given the possibility that the Egyptians might have launched a major counterattack with armor in the central Sinai. Reports on the morning of the 31st, after all, had indicated the approach of a large tank force just west of Gebel Libni, which caused Ben-Ari to veer in a westward direction instead of helping Adan seize Ruafa Dam. A large tank battle west of Abu Ageila might favor the Egyptians, who controlled much of the central route and could field upward of a division against a spread-out Israeli 7th Armored Brigade. Such an advantage certainly could be offset by the Israeli Air Force, but given the delicate operational situation, Dayan could ill afford to take too many risks. His con-

cern for logistics routes was later validated on 1 November when the 7th Armored Brigade experienced logistical problems in its advance toward the canal—even without having to deal with major Egyptian resistance. On that

A sandy desert track near Abu Ageila

Courtesy of Infantry and Brig. Gen. S. L. A. Marshall



day, Ben-Ari halted his pursuit of withdrawing Egyptian armor owing to fuel shortages, and his brigade was able to proceed westward again on the next day only because it had captured gasoline storage tanks at Bir Rod Salim.⁴⁶

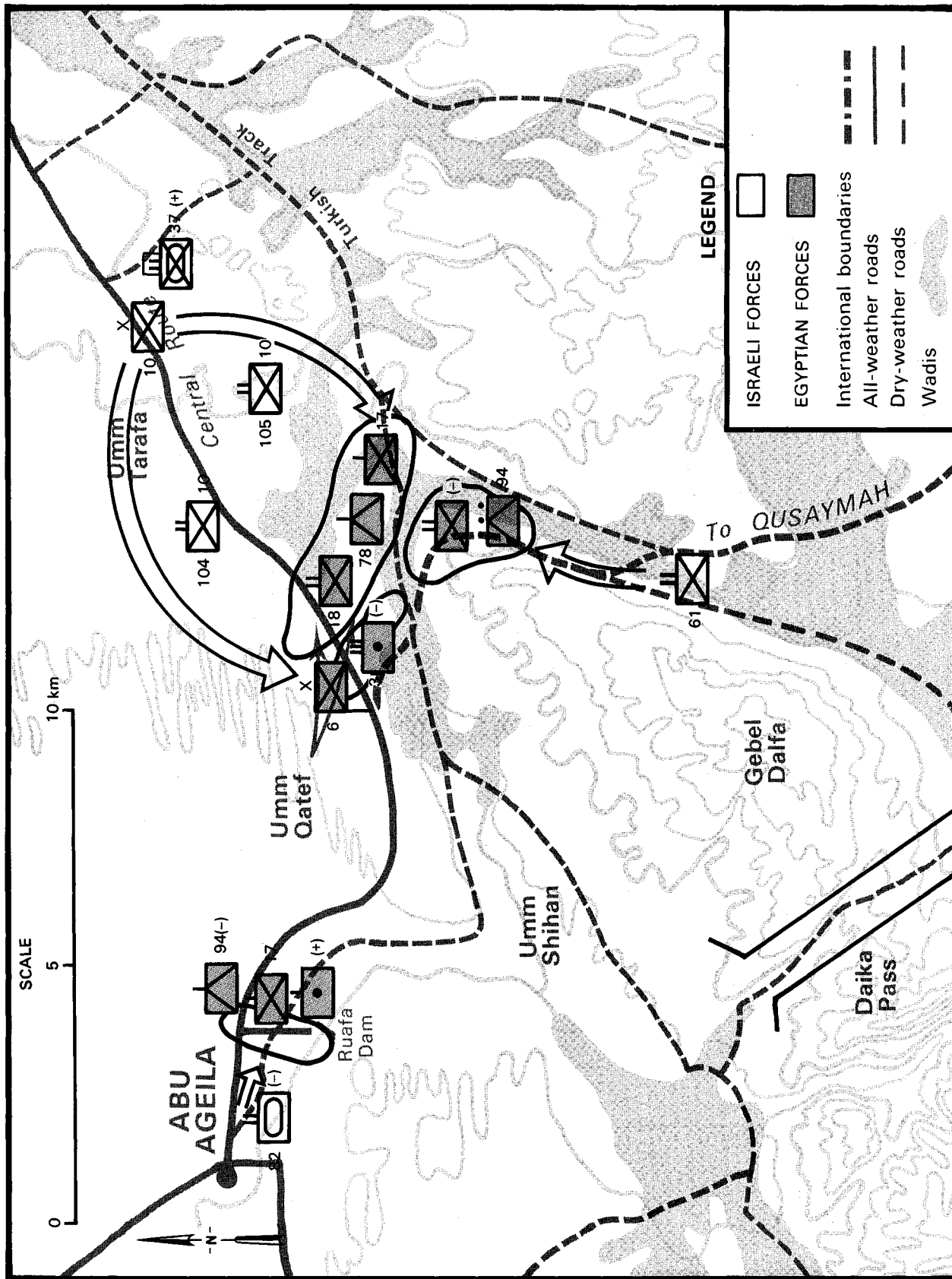
In addition to his command tensions with Wallach and Goder on the 31st, Dayan had a major problem with Ben-Gurion, the nation's leader. Dayan pushed for an attack on Abu Ageila, expecting France and Britain to follow their ultimatum of the 30th with the actual bombing of Egyptian airfields on the 31st. He probably reasoned that his troops would then advance quickly to the canal and require logistical support at a faster tempo than alternate routes could provide. Ben-Gurion, however, wanted all Israeli troops withdrawn from the Sinai, because the British and French air strikes planned for the morning of the 31st had not taken place, and the prime minister, unclear as to the reasons for this delay, feared a betrayal. Dayan resisted the execution of Ben-Gurion's order, and his action proved correct, for France and Britain began their strikes at 1900 on the 31st.⁴⁷

Too many variables in the midst of the fog of war seemed to drive Dayan to press on for the conquest of Abu Ageila. In the wake of the Dayan-Wallach debate, the chief of the General Staff had his way, and the IDF made preparations for a night assault on Abu Ageila. Adan would attack Ruafa Dam from the west, break through, and assault Umm Qatef from the rear. Meanwhile, the 10th Brigade would attack Umm Qatef on the northern and southern flanks with an infantry battalion each. The task force from the 37th Brigade would penetrate through the center, while in the south, the 61st Motorized Battalion would hit the underbelly of the Abu Ageila complex (see map 12).

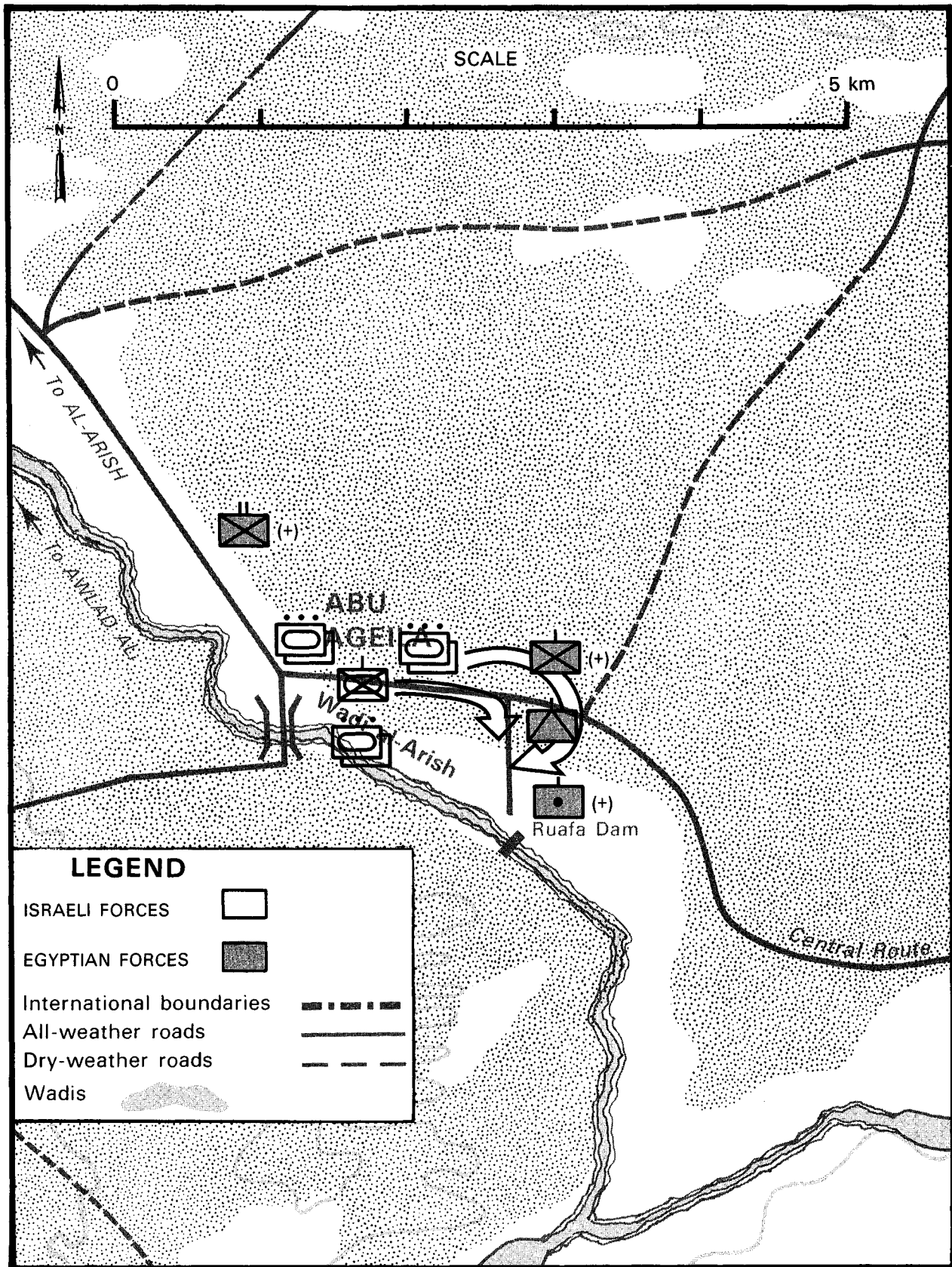
Adan's Failed Attacks

In the west, Adan, strengthened by the arrival of his second tank company, prepared to attack Ruafa Dam at 1800. Two tank platoons would remain in the vicinity of the crossroads of Abu Ageila to watch for a possible attack by the Egyptian force at Awlad Ali. To take the dam area, Adan planned to send two tank platoons to positions on a small hill south of the crossroads, where they would provide covering fire for an assault force that consisted of two tank platoons and a company of armored infantry. The infantry was to break through the defensive line and turn south against the fortified hill, while the tanks proceeded farther east and then veered south to assault the Egyptian position from the rear (see map 13). Israeli artillery provided additional fire support during the early phase of the assault.⁴⁸

Unfortunately for the Israelis, events did not proceed according to plan. After encountering some initial resistance, the Israeli infantry managed to break through the defensive line and head south as planned. However, the tank force, while it moved parallel with the infantry, failed to move farther east and south to envelop the Egyptian position. This failure resulted from the darkness that descended on the area and hampered Israeli movement. The critical time Adan lost awaiting the arrival of the second tank company now came to haunt the Israelis. Though the dam did fall to the Israeli attackers, the ensuing dusk caused confusion among the Israelis and forced



Map 12. Israeli plan of attack, 31 October—1 November



Adan to withdraw in the face of an Egyptian counterattack that won back the Ruafa position by 2300. Refusing to give up, Adan regrouped and made a second attempt at 0330 on 1 November—but again without success.⁴⁹

The Egyptians had held their ground at Ruafa Dam with a single infantry company supported by six to eight 25-pounders, eight to ten Archers, and seven to twelve 57-mm antitank guns.⁵⁰ Mutawalli, the Egyptian brigade commander, later underscored for a Western journalist the exemplary performance of this combined arms force: “They fought like a brigade. They fired till their guns melted.”⁵¹ Although the Egyptians had not fortified Ruafa Dam as they had Umm Qatef, Israeli armor and infantry had still failed to attain its objective.

The Second Israeli Assault on Umm Qatef

East of Umm Qatef, Israeli infantry also failed to reach its goal, but with more disastrous results. At nightfall, Goder dispatched the 104th and 105th Infantry Battalions of the 10th Brigade with orders to flank the main defensive position from both the north and south respectively in conjunction with operations in the west and south. Both battalions, however, got lost in the dark. Nonetheless, by midnight on 1 November, at least one Israeli platoon had managed to break into the main perimeter just south of Umm Qatef, but the Israelis proved unable to exploit this success. Hand-to-hand combat ensued between Israeli and Egyptian soldiers, with cries of pain from bayonet wounds chilling the desert air. In the confusion, both sides lost soldiers to friendly fire. Resolute Egyptians—helped in part by a timely counterattack by an infantry company—forced the Israelis to retreat.⁵²

The Egyptians held out, in part, because of aggressive and clever tactics. Throughout the battle for Abu Ageila, Mutawalli willingly displaced his artillery and machine-gun sections to new positions, bringing some of the artillery forward to Umm Qatef.⁵³ The Egyptians also managed to surprise the Israeli 105th Infantry Battalion moving against the Egyptian right flank by successfully concealing an infantry company armed with four medium machine guns on a hill south of the Turkish Track. During the Israeli probe on the morning of the 31st, the Egyptian company apparently held its fire. Later, in the evening, the Egyptians surprised the attacking Israelis and pinned down part of the battalion.⁵⁴ Wallach later admitted the Egyptians had made excellent use of terrain in building their defenses.⁵⁵ The Israelis, for their part, failed to launch any surprise attacks on Umm Qatef to unnerve the Egyptian defenders.

Dayan was now thoroughly disgusted with the performance of the 10th Brigade. On learning that its two assault battalions had lost their way, he met with Simhoni, the front commander, and the two men decided to dismiss the brigade commander.⁵⁶ Wallach, located with his artillery south of Tarat Umm Basis, received an order to personally inform Goder.⁵⁷ Despite losing his command, Goder was “rehabilitated” after the war and eventually promoted to brigadier general—ironically at one point serving as the chief of the Military Tribunal of Appeals.⁵⁸

According to Wallach, Goder, a highly competent artilleryman from the Soviet Union, proved incapable of leading an infantry brigade in combat. In

Goder's defense, however, it should be noted that his brigade had to fight without armor support and had only a battalion-size force initially—albeit supported with Israeli artillery fire—with which to assault Umm Qatef in daylight across five kilometers of open terrain without the benefit of surprise. Furthermore, not all the 10th Brigade's problems had been of Goder's making. Even Wallach admitted that the brigade had an inordinate number of reservists over the age of 40, and the IDF was to learn from the war that such individuals should have been placed in combat support positions.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, there was still hope that the strategic reserve might accomplish its mission.

The GHQ could not commit the entire 37th Brigade to Abu Ageila to ensure success because it had already assigned one of its tank companies and a company of armored infantry to help the 11th Infantry Brigade conquer the Gaza Strip.⁶⁰ For the battle at Abu Ageila, Colonel Shmuel Golinka, the brigade commander of the 37th, ordered two tank companies and two companies of infantry on half-tracks to leave their concentration area near Beersheba—with the tanks traveling on lorries as the infantry moved on ahead. As mentioned earlier, the new plan called for seizing Umm Qatef during the night of 31 October—1 November with two infantry battalions of the 10th Brigade—one flanking from the north and the other from the south. Then, in the early hours of the morning of 1 November, the task force from the 37th Brigade would launch a frontal attack on Umm Qatef and punch through to the dam, while other Israeli forces would attack from the south and the west (see map 12). This plan gave more armor punch to the infantry attacks in the east than envisaged in the revised Operation Kadesh.

While the 10th Brigade conducted its futile attacks against Umm Qatef during the evening of 31 October—1 November, Golinka waited impatiently for his task force in order to attack in the early morning. His two infantry companies arrived on schedule, but the tanks still trailed far behind on transports. After waiting until around 0400 on 1 November, Golinka finally decided to attack without his armor, initiating a frontal assault even though the 10th Brigade, in an earlier such attack, had failed. Golinka personally led the charge of infantry in half-tracks, with headlights on, perhaps thinking he might intimidate the Egyptian defenders into submission. The Egyptians, however, used Archers and artillery to inflict numerous casualties on the attacking Israelis, and where Egyptian fire missed, minefields took their toll. The Israelis lost twenty killed and sixty-five wounded in the 37th Brigade alone; among the dead was Golinka himself.⁶¹

In his book on the 1956 war, Dayan assessed the fiasco thus: "the failure of 37th Brigade was due to the over-eagerness of its officers to rush the enemy defenses."⁶² During the battle, however, Dayan had castigated the officers of the 10th Brigade for their lack of zeal. This stance had no doubt heightened Golinka's desire to press his attack. Israeli intelligence, perhaps aware of the beginnings of an Egyptian general withdrawal from the Sinai, also contributed to the debacle by reporting that the Egyptian defenses were on the point of collapse.⁶³ Despite Israeli optimism, at noontime on the 1st, after forty-eight hours of battle—some of it fierce—the Egyptians still retained control of their defensive perimeter, despite numerous assaults by elements from three Israeli brigades. Military events taking place outside the Sinai, however, would force the Egyptians to withdraw from the peninsula.

The Abandonment of Abu Ageila

At 1800 on Tuesday, 30 October, the British and French ambassadors in Cairo and Jerusalem had delivered their ultimatum to both the Egyptian and Israeli governments. Their notes demanded an immediate cease-fire and the withdrawal of all Egyptian forces to the west bank. British and French troops would occupy the three cities of Port Said, Ismailia, and Suez City. Since Israeli troops were to be permitted to advance to within ten miles east of the Suez, Israel stood to gain territory from this arrangement. Thus far, Israeli forces had not advanced that close to the canal. The notes required a response from Israel and Egypt within twelve hours. Ben-Gurion understandably accepted the ultimatum, while Nasser rejected it outright.

The joint British-French ultimatum created a strategic dilemma for Egypt. Haykal describes the first reactions among the country's political and military leaders: "News of the ultimatum was received with astonishment bordering on disbelief."⁶⁴ Nasser and Amer, anxiously awaiting the next step from the two European states, suspended any plans for major operations in the Sinai.⁶⁵

By this time, however, the Egyptian high command had a clear picture of the battle situation in the Sinai. To the Egyptians, the Israelis appeared to be involved in two major efforts, one along the Kuntilla to Mitla route and the other along the central route through Abu Ageila to the Suez Canal. In light of this assessment, the battle for Abu Ageila emerged as the "key" (*miftah*) to the entire campaign in the Sinai. GHQ wanted forward positions to hold, with the mission of delaying and impeding Israeli forces while Egyptian armor prepared for a counterattack that would drive the Israelis out of the Sinai. The Egyptians planned to unleash two major task forces—each consisting of an armored brigade of T-34 tanks and SU-100 self-propelled guns—supported by an infantry brigade. One force would move on the central route to deal with the Israelis at Abu Ageila, while the second moved against the paratroopers at Mitla. A third force would remain in the Bir Gifgafa and Bir Rod Salim area as a reserve.⁶⁶ But the ultimatum put this plan into abeyance.

Then on the 31st at 1900, French and British bombers began their attacks on Egyptian airfields, destroying much of the Egyptian Air Force on the tarmac. Now Egypt had to deal with a second front in the war, but one much more threatening to the state than the theater of operations in the Sinai. Following the bombing of Egyptian airfields, Nasser immediately concluded that his entire army in the Sinai might be cut off by a European expeditionary force occupying the canal area. He therefore called an emergency meeting of top political and military leaders to discuss strategic options. Against the opposition of several individuals, including his war minister Amer, Nasser ordered a general withdrawal from the Sinai.⁶⁷

GHQ in Cairo quickly drew up plans for a phased pullout to be extended over two days. The armored group at Bir Gifgafa and part of the force at Mitla Pass would withdraw to the west bank of the canal under the cover of darkness during the night of 31 October—1 November, while the 5th Brigade at Rafah pulled back to al-Arish. The second armored group and the defenders at al-Arish and Abu Ageila would act as covering forces. Then, during the night of 1—2 November, Egyptian troops at al-Arish and Abu Ageila and the

remainder of the soldiers at Mitla were to fight their way back to the west bank.⁶⁸ Nasser felt he must do this to save his army and prepare for the defense of the Egyptian heartland against two European powers about to launch a major invasion of his country.

Qadi, the division commander at al-Arish, apparently waited until 1700 on 1 November to inform Mutawalli of the withdrawal.⁶⁹ He may have reasoned that this would avoid causing a collapse in morale among Egyptian troops at Abu Ageila. In fact, during the night of 31 October—1 November, the defenders at Abu Ageila faced the most serious attacks launched against them during the war—and from at least two directions. In intense fighting, the Israelis lost one brigade commander killed in action, and Dayan relieved another brigade commander. From the Israeli viewpoint, this period saw perhaps the worst fighting performance of the IDF in the entire war.

Mutawalli informed his immediate subordinates of the withdrawal shortly after receiving Qadi's directive. The brigade commander planned a pullout in three phases, at thirty-minute intervals, beginning at 1830. A skeleton artillery crew and an infantry company were to remain and fire throughout the night to create the impression that conditions were unchanged at Abu Ageila.⁷⁰ The Egyptians were so successful in this ruse that for the next sixteen hours the Israelis made no attempt to enter Abu Ageila.

By late morning of 1 November—even before the Egyptian 6th Brigade began its withdrawal—Dayan suspended operations, leaving the fortifications surrounded but unpressed by attacks. New missions went out to the various Israeli units. The bulk of the 7th Armored Brigade, already west of Gebel Libni, was instructed to continue its advance toward the Suez Canal. The 61st Infantry Battalion (motorized) was to remain south of Umm Qatef under the control of the 10th Brigade and its new commander, Colonel Israel Tal. To support the 61st Battalion in its encirclement of Abu Ageila from the south, Tal transferred an infantry battalion to it from the 10th Brigade. Adan kept one tank company to hold the Abu Ageila crossroads, while a second company headed west. The 37th Brigade, for its part, lost one tank company to the 10th Brigade, while the remainder of the task force was to join Adan at Abu Ageila, by way of Qusaymah, to defeat the Egyptian force at Awlad Ali.⁷¹ As the Israelis reshuffled their forces, they now hoped to starve the defenders into submission.

By 0400 on 2 November, Wallach—suspecting something amiss because of the relative inactivity within the Abu Ageila complex—sent a tank company from the 37th Brigade and two infantry companies from the 10th Brigade to investigate. Wallach's headquarters, however, failed to inform Adan, situated to the west, of the troop's entry into the defensive complex. Wallach's infantry, finding no Egyptians, occupied Umm Qatef, and his tanks continued west in the direction of Ruafa Dam. Adan's force, unaware of developments at Umm Qatef, thought the Israeli tanks approaching them were Egyptian and opened fire, destroying eight tanks and forcing four others to retreat.⁷² This event was the last of the Israeli missteps at Abu Ageila, and the most tragic—one they could blame only on themselves.

A Final Assessment of Operations

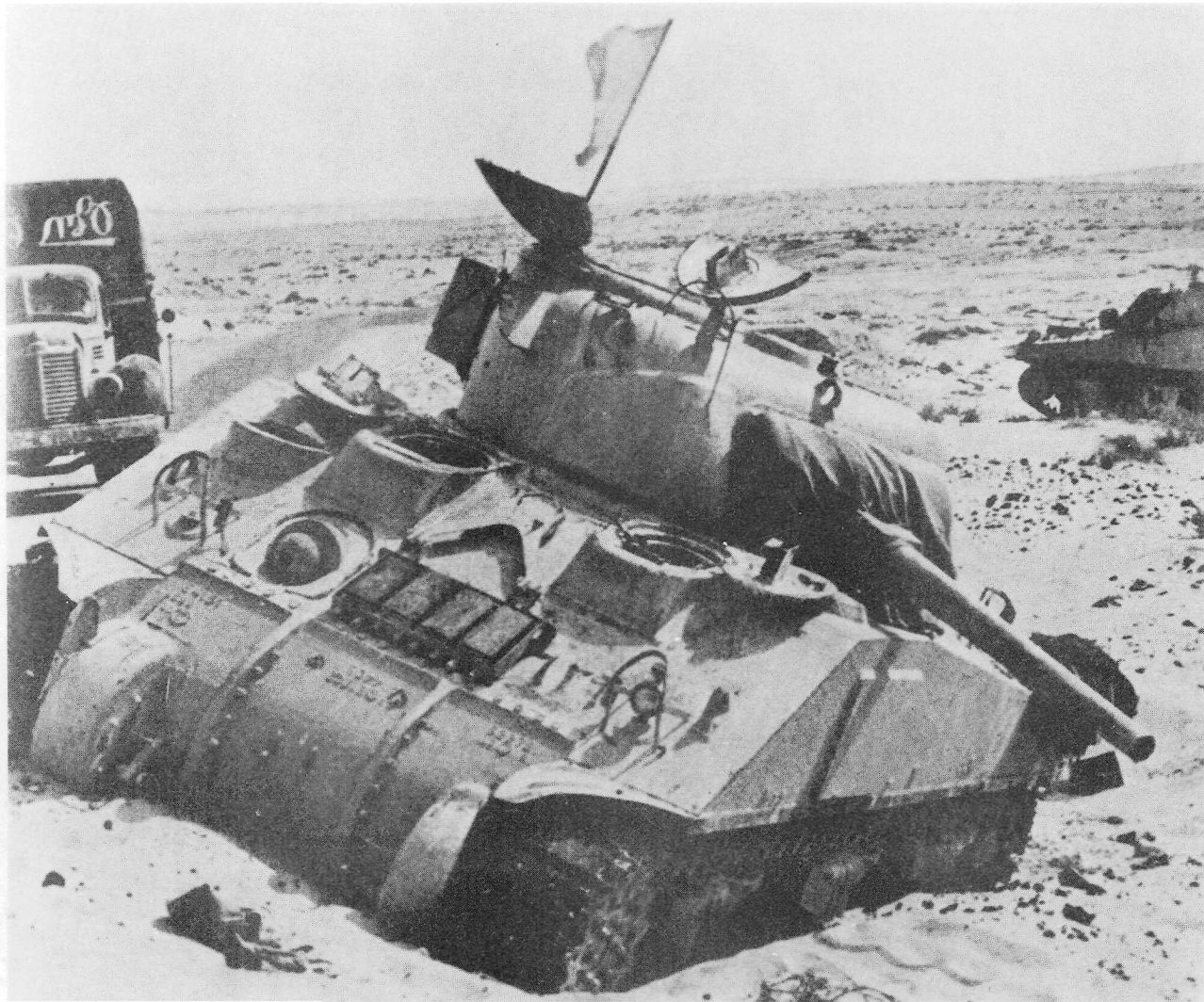
Several writers have pointed out that no major Egyptian position at Abu Ageila had fallen to the Israelis when the French and British commenced their bombing operation.⁷³ Maintaining those defenses after the bombing, however, would have proven suicidal, so Nasser abandoned the Sinai to defend the heartland of Egypt. Any final assessment of the Battle of Abu Ageila must deal with the operational and tactical developments during those critical days of 31 October and 1 November.

Even before the arrival of the withdrawal order, the Egyptian defenders at Abu Ageila were hemmed in by Israelis from the west, east, and south—with little hope of receiving reinforcements. By the late evening of the 31st, the Israelis began to assault Rafah with the 77th *Ugdah*. Qadi, the commander of the Egyptian 3d Infantry Division, faced an Israeli division-size force that threatened to take Rafah on the way to al-Arish. Thus, Mutawalli, the commander of Egyptian forces at Abu Ageila, could expect no more help from his superior.

The only other Egyptian hope for reinforcements and supplies lay with the two armored brigades and the infantry brigade assembling at Bir Rod Salim. But this force had its own problems, even before the British and French bombed Egypt's airfields on the 31st. During daylight hours on the 30th and 31st, the Israeli Air Force—perhaps aided by the French—attacked the Egypt-

Foundered Egyptian tanks

Israel Defense Army 1948–1958

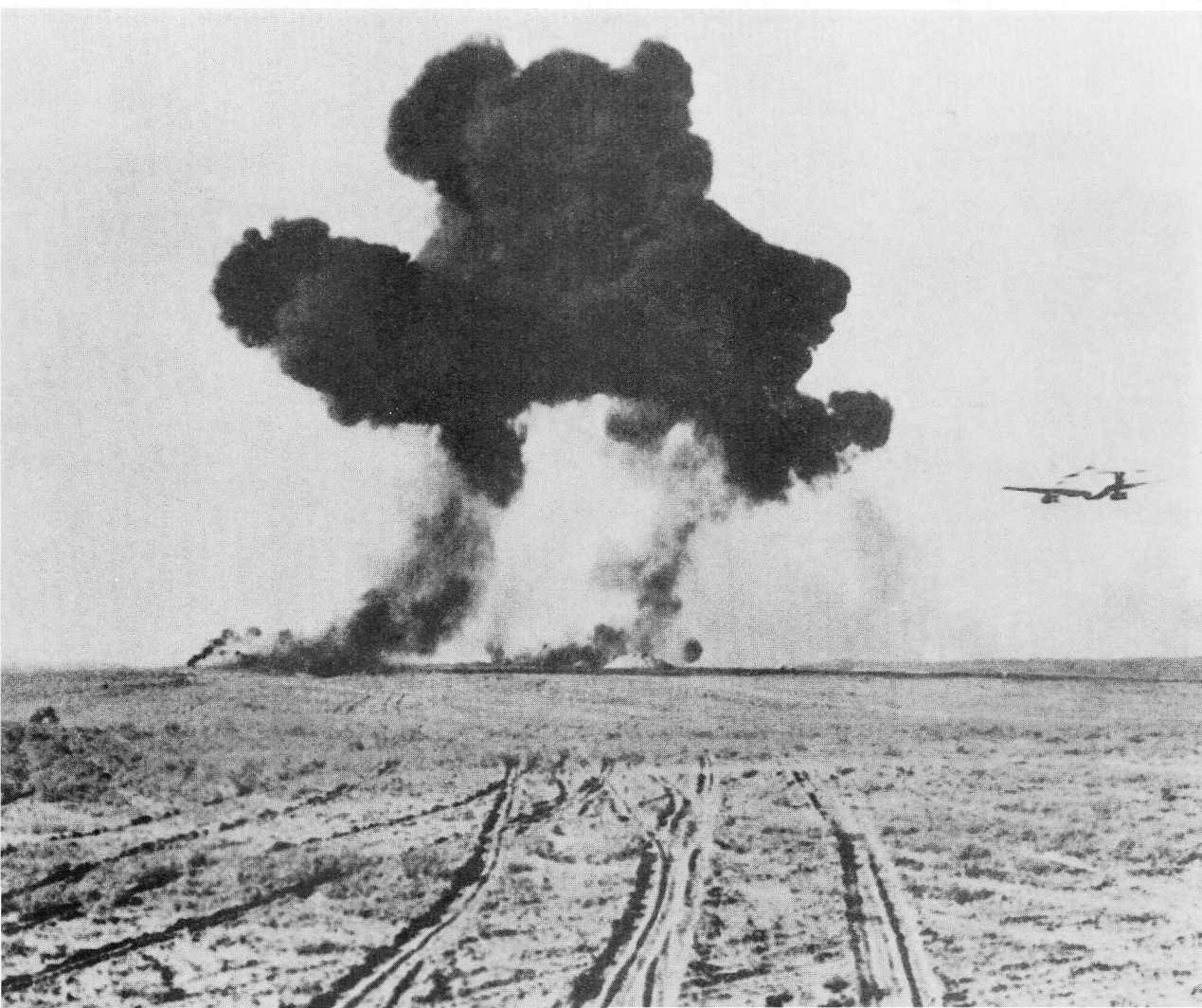


tian armor, inflicting much damage. Some sources claim the losses were so severe that they forced Egyptian commanders to halt their advance.⁷⁴ Thus, the Egyptian armor force, weakened in firepower, had lost much of its ability to break through to Abu Ageila and rescue the defenders there.

By the evening of 1 November, the tactical situation had become desperate for Mutawalli. His provisions had run extremely low, especially after the heavy Israeli air attacks during 1 November.⁷⁵ One source has claimed that only 5 or 6 rounds remained for each Egyptian artillery piece and that the Egyptian 6th Brigade had only 200 gallons of water for approximately 3,500 men.⁷⁶ Certainly, Mutawalli could not have held out much longer when ordered to pull out. From their harsh combat experience, the Egyptians have learned that troops in forward positions need more than the fifteen-days' supplies that they had allotted them in 1956.⁷⁷

Uncertainty as to how many Egyptian defenders at Abu Ageila actually managed to return to the west bank of the canal clouds a final assessment of the battle. Unit cohesion broke down among a number of infantry battalions of the 3d Division in the general withdrawal from the Sinai so that many soldiers had to rely on their own survival abilities during the long trek through the desert to the Suez Canal. GHQ ordered the men of the 3d to don Bedouin garb, if necessary, in their hasty retreat.⁷⁸ As Haykal noted, "Every man [became] his [own] responsibility."⁷⁹ Most of the men of the 6th Brigade also

Israeli napalm attack of enemy fortifications in the Sinai



Israel Defense Army 1948—1958



Some Egyptian prisoners of war



Israel Defense Army 1948-1958

Major General Dayan, announcing the successful conclusion of operations in the Sinai in 1956. Brigadier General Simhoni, commander of the Southern Command, looks on at left

reached the canal in a state of disarray, although the 18th Infantry Battalion did reach al-Arish, and then the canal, intact as a unit.⁸⁰

Despite their abandonment of Abu Ageila, Egyptian officers had led their men in an exemplary fashion. Boulos, the original brigade commander, became a casualty while preparing his men for a counterattack. Mutawalli, who replaced him, emerged as a national hero, helped in large measure by the Egyptian regime's propaganda machine: "Mutawalli's twenty-six day odyssey across the desert and Canal to Cairo became one of the folk-legends of the Sinai campaign. He escaped an Israeli patrol, was stung by a scorpion, and spent days with Bedouin who told him of the fall of al-Arish."⁸¹ After the Sinai campaign, Mutawalli continued an illustrious career in the military, eventually reaching the rank of lieutenant general. Later, he provided crucial support to General Muhammad Fawzi, the commander in chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces, during the reconstruction of the military after its overwhelming defeat in 1967. In the early 1970s, Mutawalli ended his career in the position of adviser to President Anwar Sadat.⁸²

In the end, neither side could analyze the struggle for Abu Ageila without mixed feelings. The battle concluded with Israelis killing each other in a tank battle in broad daylight while an undetermined number of Egyptians were dying from thirst in the desert. The Egyptians had maintained a stubborn defense against a superior Israeli force for four days, and the Egyptian 6th Infantry Brigade accomplished its mission of delaying the Israeli offensive

Raising the Israeli flag atop Mount Sinai



Israel Defense Army 1948-1958

until an Egyptian armored division crossed the Suez Canal and deployed at Bir Rod Salim. The Israelis, on the other hand, had surrounded Abu Ageila with a daring armor move into the Egyptian rear and forced the position to the point of surrender by the time the withdrawal order arrived from Cairo. At the same time, Israeli armor had demonstrated to Dayan its maneuver capabilities.

Ultimately, Egypt suffered a major defeat—but only at the hands of the combined power of Israel, France, and Britain. In the next conflict, Israel might not be so fortunate. She could not count on coalition warfare and might even face war on more than one front. Such proved to be the case, but fortunately for the Israelis, the IDF prepared well for this eventuality, drawing in part on its 1956 experience.
